

New London County Historical Society

11 Blinman Street

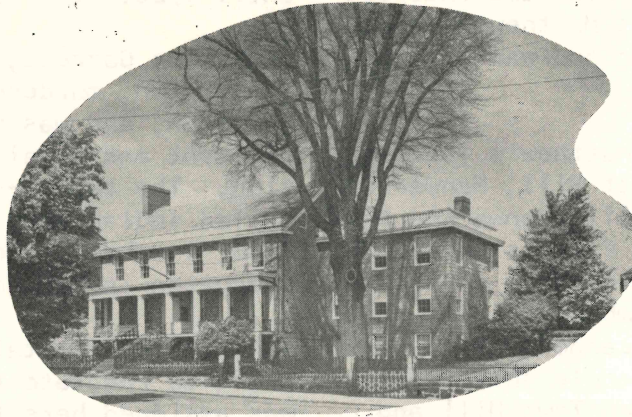
SHAW MANSION

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Quarterly



Bulletin

VOLUME 9

APRIL 1961

NUMBER 2

THE HILLS OF NEW LONDON

New London, like Rome, had seven hills, but it is hard to find where one begins and the other ends. Some are still known by their old names, others have lost their identity in modern street names.

First in importance to the young community was Meeting House Hill. This name was applied to the whole ridge between the First and Second Burial Grounds. Near the south corner of Granite and Hempstead Streets stood the meeting house (which was at first actually a barn), the pound and the jail. Across the square lay the First Burial Ground and the House lot of the Reverend Mr. Blinman. This was six acres on the north side of Granite Street between the Burial Ground and Williams Street. From whatever direction this area is approached there is still a sharp rise: from Main, State, Hempstead or Fremont Street.

Before Huntington Street was cut through and the ground somewhat leveled it was a long hard pull up from Main Street to the meeting house. Small wonder that in 1687 the Groton residents wanted to invite the minister to preach over there every third Sunday during the winter. One shudders at the thought of the river crossing as a mere prelude to all-day sessions in the unheated church. Apparently in more clement weather the Grotonites enjoyed the outing, for it was not until 1702 that they had a church and minister of their own.

The house on the southeast corner of the Blinman lot (Hempstead and Granite Streets) is the highest spot in the center of town. It was from this general area that Arnold is supposed to have watched the burning and the attacks on the two forts in 1781.

Post Hill is recognizable by the sharp rise on Williams Street coming from the Norwich Road, and the hill carries on to the west with Crest Street poised on its north brink, and Nathan Hale Street and Summit Avenue descending its south side to Vauxhall Street. The north-south route which many use to avoid traffic in the centre of town follows exactly the first road through the town: from Mill Brook (or the Norwich Road) over Post Hill and Williams Street to Manwaring Hill, down Blackhall and Truman Streets to Town Hill.

The "Post" is for Richard Post, an early settler, whose house lot was on this hill. He was a blacksmith, or as he styled himself in a deed, a hammersmith. In 1651 he sold his house lot to Amos Richardson and disappeared from New London records. But Richardson was not to be left to enjoy his possession. By an exchange the Post lot came again to the town. When Richard Royce, who kept an ordinary, was looking for land six years later he was granted this lot.

A rather small and almost private hill adjoins Post Hill on the south side of Vauxhall Street. William Comstock lived near

the corner of Vauxhall and Williams Streets. Next south of him was eight acres divided between Mrs. Lake and John Elderkin, the dividing line being Granite Street. Next south and near the intersection of Broad Street was Matthew Waller. This "elevated" neighborhood was called Waller's Hill.

One can only wonder if Matthew's jealousy got the upper hand. Post Hill, Manwaring Hill, why not Waller Hill? Manwaring Hill does have some claim to fame as being the scene of one of many skirmishes with the British troops on September 6, 1781. On the common was a small cannon, which was not manned, but a few people shot it at the foe as they came down Town Hill and then fled. A small detachment of British was sent up Blackhall Street to contend with this and was harassed by shot from behind walls. Three or four soldiers were killed and were buried by the side of the road.

The townspeople made use of their hills that day to the extent that the official report of the British notes that they collected on the hill north of the meeting house (Post Hill) and seemed resolved to hold it, exposing the invaders to constant fire "from the rebels on the neighboring hills and from the fort on the Groton side". There is an engraving of New London from Manwaring Hill, made about 1835.

The Manwaring house was the only one in that section of town. Originally the land was granted to George Chappell. When William Thomson came to New London as a missionary to the Pequots and Mohegans in 1657, he had a house on Manwaring Hill, which was sold to Oliver Manwaring when Thomson left town in 1663. As a missionary he was not a great success, partly because Uncas would have none of him.

Fort Hill was a sharp ridge at the water end of the Parade. It was reserved at the first laying out of the town for a fortification. In 1662 all the military officers were ordered to lay it out. Changes in the terrain have obliterated any semblance of a hill at the water's edge, but Arnold found the old magazine and battery there for him to destroy.

Of all the hills, more romance and legend attaches to Town Hill than to the others.

It was a starting point on journeys to Niantic, to Lyme and on to the Connecticut River. It had a windmill on it which, though planned for in 1719, was not built until 1726. It was the scene of a hanging.

Katherine Garrett, a Pequot from North Stonington, murdered her infant child in Saybrook, and was brought here for confinement and trial and subsequent execution. The twenty-seven year old girl, called Indian Kate, was hung on May 3, 1738, in what is believed to be the first execution in New London.

In 1764 when Britain kept ships on the coast to regulate the trade, the Cygnet was assigned here for three winters. Her officers contributed to the gaiety of the town, and Capt. Philip Durrell, her commander, is said to have had a flag staff erected on Town Hill where his ensign was always displayed when he was ashore.

While more menacing British ships were in and out of the harbor in 1779, the militia was busy building on Town Hill a timber and sod fortification, with breastworks and field pieces. It never had an official name, only the one the natives gave it--Fort Nonsense. Arnold perhaps does it too much honor in his official report when he says it fired upon his men for some time as they made their way up Brown's Gate (Ocean Avenue), but it was evacuated at their approach. In it he says they found six pieces of cannon mounted and two dismantled. Fort Nonsense was near the spot where Indian Kate's gibbet was built and where the windmill and Capt. Durrell's flag staff stood.

Last, but in name far from least of our seven hills was Royce's Mountain. This was a craggy height north of the town where were the "mountain farms". It is quite possible that the United States has just bought a piece of Royce's Mountain for the extension of the Coast Guard Academy.

Acknowledgment to Miss Caulkins and deep gratitude to Miss Cecelia Griswold, whose Index makes the History of New London a joy to use. Modern street names are used for clarity.

A PUBLIC HEARING IS NEEDED ON THE CUSTOM HOUSE

Representatives of the General Services Administration, absentee landlords of the New London Custom House, owe it to New London to meet with members of the Redevelopment Commission and other interested citizens to resolve certain differences of opinion that have caused widespread dismay regarding the future of the Custom House.

The last issue of the Society's Bulletin indicated that the Treasury Department had no plans at present to abandon the use of this historic building. Two recent contradictory news items concerning the Custom House are in desperate need of reconciliation.

A page one story in The Day of March 29 reported that the Custom House has been branded uneconomic by the General Services Administration. Rep. Horace Seely-Brown, Jr., informed The Day that he has been told by GSA administrator John L. Moore that a space-needs investigation in New London "indicates that from an economic standpoint we should discontinue use of the 128-year old Custom House which has long been functionally obsolete." Mr. Moore anticipated that the results of further surveys would be ready by the end of May.

A front page article in The Day of April 11 on the Rotival Plan for New London's Future Redevelopment reported that "while redevelopment is intended to change the face of a large part of the city, it is not intended to change the city's character. As a matter of fact, it is aimed at reinforcing the city's unique qualities by exploiting the waterfront, old buildings, historic ties to the sea." The story further stated that "Bank Street would be relocated along the river front, with buildings now on the water side, except for the Custom House, eliminated to make way for an esplanade and parking."

The town's redevelopment planners consider the Custom House an historic site worthy of preservation. The staff of the Custom House considers the building efficient for the operation of its program. Postmaster Sullivan says he is puzzled as to where the Custom House facilities could be accommodated in the Post Office. What more important reasons can be advanced for its retention in its present use?

MASSACHUSETTS SOCIETY GIVES VOLUMES OF WINTHROP PAPERS

A notable addition to the Society's library has been received from the Massachusetts Historical Society in the gift of the Winthrop Papers. The great collection from which these volumes were printed has been called "the most important contribution of original material ever made to earliest New England history."

The manuscript accumulations of Adam Winthrop (1548-1623) of Groton, England, of his son Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts, leader of the Puritan emigration to New England, of Governor John Winthrop, Jr., of Connecticut, settler of New London, and of the sons of John, Jr., Governor Fitz-John Winthrop of Connecticut and Major General Wait Still Winthrop, chief justice of Massachusetts, passed through many hands within and without the family. (They remained in New London for a while.) The major portion of the papers was presented to the Massachusetts Society in 1905 by the widow of Robert Charles Winthrop, Jr.

The five volumes published to date cover the period 1498-1649. Handsomely printed and bountifully illustrated, they provide invaluable aid to the researcher.

NEXT LEAGUE MEETING AT STRATFORD

The annual meeting of the Connecticut League of Historical Societies will be held in the Christ Episcopal Church at Stratford on Saturday, May 13. The meeting will start promptly at 10:30, so please plan to arrive early enough to register before that time. Stratford is just this side of Bridgeport, so New Londoners should allow two hours for travel by car.

A talk on Stratford history by Harold C. Lovell, Sr., will be followed by a presentation "Teen-Agers and Research" by Dwight C. Lyman, Educational Chairman for the League. Lunch (bring your own box lunch) will follow, with dessert and coffee provided by the Stratford Historical Society.

The business meeting and election of officers will be held at one o'clock, with President Robert J. Craig presiding. A discussion group on the subject "Saving and Preserving for the Future" will be led

by William J. Van Beynum, president of the Middletown-Middlesex County Historical Society. Categories to be considered are records of people, places and events, furniture, paintings and prints, ceramics, glassware, pewter, silver, metalware, plastics, textiles, fashions, lighting, household utensils, farm and gardening equipment, sports and hobbies, toys.

The program will conclude with a discussion of the planning and restoration of the Judson House and museum. A visit to this notable early 18th century house will follow.

Every member of the Society is eligible to attend League meetings. Please plan to be present at Stratford on the 13th. We believe you will enjoy the meeting and the people from all around the state who will attend.

HISTORY OF HARTLAND IN PREPARATION

The little town of Hartland in the north-westerly part of the state will note the 200th anniversary of its incorporation in May. A celebration is planned for June.

A history of the town is being prepared for the occasion, with pictures and maps showing many of the old places no longer in existence. The history will contain chapters devoted to churches, schools, military history, mills, historic inns and taverns, state parks and forests, biographical sketches, and statistical information. It is hoped that the book will be ready by September 1. No history of

From The New London County Historical
Society, Shaw Mansion
11 Blinman Street
New London, Connecticut

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Hartland has been published previously, it is claimed.

The edition is limited to 500 copies. Prepublication orders at \$5.00 per copy have been accepted to May 1, after which the price will be \$6.00. Orders with remittance should be made to Stanley A. Ransom, Chairman, Hartland Historical Committee, Hartland.

For Your Information

The Society's telephone number is Gibson 3-1209.

The Mansion is open Tuesday through Saturday from 1 to 4.

Custodian in residence:
Mrs. Charles Menerey

Miss Hazel A. Johnson
146 Wohegan Avenue
New London